

Media's Role in Pacific Islands Politics:  
A Roundtable Discussion

Prepared by

Dr. Thomas J. Brislin

Journalism Program

University of Hawaii at Manoa

Roundtable participants: Dr. Thomas J. Brislin, moderator  
Dr. Jim Richstad, East-West Communication  
Institute, EWC  
Ms. Leanne McLaughlin, Honolulu Star-Bulletin  
Mr. Floyd Takeuchi, Honolulu Star-Bulletin  
Mr. Kuar Singh, Fiji Sun  
Mr. Ngauea Uatiao, Atoll Pioneer  
Mr. John Griffin, Honolulu Advertiser

Introduction

The participants in this discussion agreed to focus on "a review of adversary and cooperative (developmental) press systems in the Pacific: problems and potentials." What emerged as a theme, from the roundtable itself, was a review of the barriers to efficient press coverage of politics in the Pacific islands.

Such barriers range from the geographic realities of isolation, through to the traditional colonial flow patterns of news and finally to information, and government and social pressures, covert and overt, that suppress certain news items.

A cross section of diverse Pacific press models was represented: the American adversary system by the Honolulu Advertiser and the (Guam) Pacific Daily News; the British adversary type by the Fiji Sun; and the government-controlled developmental press by the Atoll Pioneer of the Gilbert Islands. Additionally, academic evidence of flow patterns in the Pacific press was

presented along with anecdotal remarks of specific incidents of press-government conflict in Pacific coverage.

No specific model of press-government or press-politics relationships was advocated by the participants, but each speaker measured his or her experiences with such relationships against the libertarian-free press ideals of the British and American journalistic heritage.

### Background

In general, the Pacific has a tradition of the libertarian press system imported from Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. In a libertarian press system, the press is free to print whatever it wants. There is no prior restraint and the only post-publication constraints are those traditionally found in libel statutes, and, more recently, in official secrets acts.

The libertarian press was spawned in Great Britain and its ideals, if not its practices, were imported to the thirteen American colonies as well as to the later Pacific colonies.

From the libertarian system of the press came what has been called the "watchdog function" of the press over government, establishing the adversary relationship between the two.

The concept of the libertarian press, however, was predicated on the availability of a multitude of possible voices in the public forum. In such a multitude, the truth will bear out, and those members of the press dealing in prevarication and chicanery will fall by the wayside--sort of a media kin to Darwin's selection theories: Only the fittest would survive, and in order to be fit, one had to deal with the truth.

Contemporary economics have seriously undercut the "multitude of voices" foundation of the libertarian press concept. It is not nearly so easy, even

in a wealthy country such as the United States, to engage in an independent, successful press operation as it was when the American "founding fathers" applied the libertarian concept to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing freedom of the press.

A similar absence of a "multitude of voices" in the Pacific has cast doubt on the libertarian press there, as well. Such doubts have taken the form of stated desires for the press to take less of an adversary role with the government and more of a cooperative, or joint developmental role.

As Pacific island states develop independence from colonial government control, they also lean toward a desire to gain independence from the imported concept of libertarian, adversary press.

The developing independent states are producing leaders caught between the colonial tradition of libertarianism and the indigenous social leadership system of chiefs, nobles and elders.

Such leaders are calling not for an abolishment of free press systems, but for more of a government-press partnership in determining the ideal presentation of government or political news which would best serve the social development of the state.

Newspapers have, naturally, expressed little interest in such a partnership, as what "freedoms" remain after such a press-government relationship would be academic, at best.

Somewhere between the extremes of the purely adversary and the purely developmental, however, might lie a press system more suited to "the Pacific Way."

Before any such determination might be made, however, an overview must be made of Pacific press systems and their attendant problems in covering governmental and political news, noted.

This was the purpose of the roundtable.

### The Dictates of Tradition

Dr. Jim Richstad of the East-West Center's Communication Institute has conducted an extensive study of news flow patterns in the Pacific. The two year study noted the flow of news across the Pacific as well as the flow from island region-to-island region.

Richstad reported "clear evidence" that news flows along colonial lines. The source of news of areas outside of the island's own region is mostly the main country of colonial ties, and that country is also the most common location of the news events reported.

Richstad reported that his study found "very little evidence of news across the (island regions). Very little about Tonga is reported in Saipan; there is little in Tahiti papers about the British or American (island) groups."

Exceptions to this pattern, Richstad noted, occurred with news originating from Noumea about the South Pacific Commission meeting and from limited use of the PEACESAT regional news exchange experiment.

This satellite system, Richstad noted, could cut across regional news flow patterns, and it did. The clearest example, Richstad said, was with the Cook Island News which is the only Pacific newspaper regularly printing news about other Pacific regions. All of the items in the Cook Island coverage come from the PEACESAT exchanges.

"The satellite can leap over traditional news flow patterns but hasn't been able to leap over political and other constraints," Richstad said.

He cited the example of Fiji, which had to drop out of the news exchange because of sentiment by Fiji Post-Telegraph that the satellite was in unfair competition with commercial news services and common carriers.

Ownership patterns also tend to follow colonial lines, Richstad reported. In Guam, Saipan and even Hawaii, press ownership is centered off-island. In Fiji and Papua New Guinea, ownership is held in Australia. Along with ownership in the metropolitan country comes the provision of international news through wire services from that country, such as the Australian Association Press to Fiji and Papua New Guinea, and United Press International to Guam and American Samoa.

Within common colonially governed groups there might exist other news exchanges. Richstad noted a "newspaper exchange ring" with Fiji at the center, trading newspaper copies as a news exchange method with other former British colonial islands.

The traditional flow patterns do tend to dissipate with independence, Richstad added. After a period of independence, he said, news patterns start changing to take on a "broader view." He noted the Fiji Times, the Papua New Guinea Post-Courier and the Samoa Times were beginning to show a wider view of Third World countries and less reliance on New Zealand for both a source of news and for a location of news events to report.

In discussing the consequences of the Pacific news flow patterns, Richstad said:

"If countries are going to learn how to solve their own problems, one of the best sources is people with the same kinds of problems; and as long as the news--the international news system--is structured so these countries do not exchange news--that their news patterns go through a metropolitan country (which is the present pattern)--they're not getting that kind of news that can help them deal with their political problems.

"In a way it's very dismal to look at, but in another way you can be very hopeful because the old pattern does seem to be breaking up: the

diversity of sources does seem to be available, the technology is readily available and in place to break the pattern completely, but there are still other problems (such as the political) that get in the way."

### "The Weakness of the Press"

Even the established adversary press has its weaknesses in covering government. One of them is the fact that it is too often too "established."

John Griffin, editorial page editor of the Honolulu Advertiser and a writer about South Pacific affairs through the editorial sections of his paper, compared the adversary press system with its alternatives by quoting Churchill on democracy: "it's the worst form . . . except for all the rest."

The American founding fathers saw the role of the adversary press as another check and balance on government, Griffin said, both in reporting governmental affairs and in its opinion function.

The creator and carrier of bad news, however, have often been confused in the American mind. Griffin stated that the First Amendment is probably the least universally accepted part of the Bill of Rights, and that if a national constitutional convention were held, it would probably be the first to be deleted.

Although the nature of island living tends to intensify press-government conflicts, Griffin said, there is still a danger of the creation of an "Establishment Press," one which is "too cozy with government or business" and enters into a "voluntary developmental journalism syndrome" that overrides the adversary relationship.

"Newspapers are in the establishment, let's face it," Griffin said, "but if you get too far in and you lose whatever critical function you have, then you become like a paper in a communist state."

Griffin also commented on the relative "powers" of the press and of government:

"I don't think that the press anywhere is much of a match for government when it comes to 'firepower.' We do get a voice, we do have a platform in American journalism. We can say what we want to editorially. We even have more access than anywhere else. But there's an awful lot of things that we miss--almost all of them by accident.

If the public is going to be concerned about the power of the press I think they should be more concerned with our weaknesses."

#### The Adversary Sun

Echoing some of Griffin's sentiments on the "Establishment Press" was Kuar Singh, stating that the Fiji Times, up until 1974, had been a benign chronicler of government events. But when the Fiji Sun, of which Singh is the chief reporter, was started, the competition forced the Times to report on developments beneath the surface of government and to take editorial stands often in disfavor of government policies.

Singh is also a Pacific Island News Association-Fulbright (PINAF) fellow attending the University of Hawaii Journalism Program.

Singh heralds the introduction of the Sun as the beginning of "muckraking," or investigative reporting in Fiji--the most obvious function of the adversary press.

But government information policies get in the way of this adversarial role, Singh reports, leaving stories unfinished in content but still published because of competition:

"Some government ministries and departments prefer talking to the press only through the Ministry of Information--using it as a shield. To get replies through this channel, it usually takes a long time. Questions have to be

submitted to the ministry which then forwards them to the relevant ministry or department as the case might be. The questions, in most cases, sit on the tables of ministerial and departmental heads for some time before getting any attention.

"So, in this sort of a situation reporters are forced to go ahead with their stories from whatever information they have. By doing this there are accusations against newspapers of thriving on half-truths and not carrying balanced stories. The critics are mostly the ones who are supposed to be giving the needed information. So you could see that newspapers are tried to be made the scapegoat."

Another major problem Singh discussed was the intensely personal reaction by government officials to being criticized in the press. Although the libertarian-adversary model calls for such "muckraking," the social mores call for deference to be shown to such leaders:

"(Investigative reports) greatly upset ministerial, departmental and organizational heads. For some, such stories 'stir up their sensibilities.'

"In most cases, newspapers and their reporters become subjects of scathing attacks. There are threats of instituting drastic actions against them."

Singh's retort, however, is that most ministers in Fiji have been in governmental service for some time and should now be used to the kind of public scrutiny of their behavior demanded by an adversarial press.

Singh would advise journalists to be absolutely sure of the facts of such a story before going ahead with publication, but once confident of their facts, they should not be deterred by any sense of "Pacific sensibilities":

"There are working journalists who are aware of the sensibilities of leaders in their areas. But when it comes to the question of choosing between this factor and the duty of a responsible journalist, they feel duty bound to select the latter."



Singh's main concern is for increased educational opportunities for journalists in the Pacific. Through expanded education, Singh feels, such concerns over the press-government relationship will be better handled, if not overcome.

#### Development Press in the Gilberts

The concept of a free press was brought to the Gilberts by Catholic and Protestant missionaries according to Ngauea Uatioa, editor of the Atoll Pioneer. Like Mr. Singh, Uatioa is a PINA fellow attending the University of Hawaii.

After World War II, the government on Tarawa began publishing its own paper in Gilbertese. In the early 50s, Uatioa reports an English language edition of the paper was published, with its main readership among government personnel and educational institutions.

The paper might better have been called a newsheet, according to Uatioa, as it was not until 1975 that the Gilbertese people saw what a newspaper should look like and should do. It was in that year that the Atoll Pioneer began to include such things as pictures, editorial comment and display advertising.

The readership increased dramatically, Uatioa said, but the new format was short-lived.

The government combined the Pioneer and the broadcast division into one information division directly run by government, discouraging many reporters who left their jobs.

There is no "freedom of expression" as such, Uatioa reported, as the press cannot, by authority, write anything against the government.

Even though the information division was made into an independent authority, Uatioa said, there are still official strictures. Quoting from the rules of

government, Uatiao said:

"The Authority will under a duty to observe impartiality in matters of political controversy...or relating to current public policy. In the discharge of their duty the Authority shall secure the exclusion of expression of their own opinion."

The language of this regulation is an archetypical example of the press-government relationship of the development press.

#### Guam, Micronesia: Expense, Expanse and Social Pressure

Attempting to cover an area as expansive as Micronesia from Guam has posed certain problems for the Pacific Daily News. Leanne McLaughlin, now an editor with the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, was city editor of the Daily News from 1977-79. From 1974-77 she was a political reporter for the Guam paper.

Floyd Takeuchi, formerly editor of the Islander, Guam's Sunday magazine, covered several Micronesian events for the Pacific Daily News, notably the Marshallese constitutional convention and the repatriation of the Bikini islanders. Takeuchi is also presently with the Honolulu Star-Bulletin.

McLaughlin recalled some of the difficulties of covering Micronesia from Guam with essentially only one full-time correspondent, based in Saipan. Plans call for expanding Micronesian bureaus to Palau and Ponape as well, McLaughlin reported.

Although the Pacific Daily News is the only "universal" medium in Micronesia, its total circulation to the islands is less than 1,000, McLaughlin said.

She did point out other island papers that serve their particular districts well, including the Marianas Variety and the Marianas Commonwealth on Saipan and the Micronesian Independent in the Marshall Islands.

McLaughlin also noted that a second daily newspaper is scheduled to debut on Guam.

Guam law provides for access to meetings of public officials and agencies as well as access to public records, McLaughlin said, but no such access legislation exists in Micronesia where information is at times withheld from journalists.

Most of the news from Micronesia is the "official view" because of this lack of access, she said.

McLaughlin also pointed out some of the tremendous communication problems in dispatching stories to Guam from Micronesia as well as limited flight and other transport schedules to travel from island to island to gather news on a timely basis.

One bright spot she noted was the plans for journalism education at the Community College of Micronesia on Ponape which will train journalists to cover the islands.

Takeuchi reiterated the communication problems in Micronesia by recounting his difficulties in raising Guam by phone from the Marshalls while covering stories there.

Takeuchi also touched on the social pressures put on journalists not to report news of "internal problems" to other island districts or to Guam.

Takeuchi himself was asked not to write certain stories about the Bikini repatriation. He also told of an incident on Saipan where police officers entered the paper's bureau office and prominently displayed their guns while asking that a story not be printed.

In another case, Takeuchi said, a Micronesian reporter feared for his personal safety in covering the Marshallese constitutional convention.

Even for Micronesian natives, then, the pressures are great--and in the case of social pressures--even greater.

### Summary

From the participants' experiences, it can be concluded that regardless of the type of press system in operation, there are problems involved in covering government adequately.

Where the press and government come into an adversary relationship, the conflict is often intensified because of the closeness of island living.

While much of the Pacific press is primarily adversarial, it does not operate in the impersonal context of metropolitan nation newspapers.

The press in the Pacific is still growing, still developing as are the island states in which it exists. Richstad's 1973 "Directory of the Pacific Press" pointed out that over half of the newspapers listed had not been in existence before 1965.

But journalism handles development well. It thrives on what is "new" as a basis for what is "news."

In maintaining the adversarial role it has taken by tradition, the Pacific press will undoubtedly continue to arouse and accept conflict with the government as a way of life.

Summing up the continuing press-government relationship in the Pacific Islands Communication Newsletter, Robert Keith-Reid, a former PINA fellow and chief reporter for the Fiji Times echoed the opinions aired by the participants at this roundtable:

"In coming years, Pacific Island journalists, native and expatriate, without being subservient, will have to develop a style of operation that sees all the news, good and bad, get into print, yet making some allowances for Pacific Island sensibilities.

"They will have to learn how to get local leaders to accept criticism coolly and with the realization that a free press must often be cruel to be kind."

Background Notes and Suggestions for Further Reading

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